

**DCS CELEBRATES FINALE OF "BUILDING FAMILIES - ONE CHILD AT A TIME "
Adoption initiative spreads awareness and celebrates successes**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. - As the Tennessee Department of Children's Services concludes its "Building Families - One Child at a Time" initiative, the Department has successfully finalized 361 adoptions, with an additional 73 estimated to be finalized by the end of the year. All DCS regional offices across the state (Davidson, East, Hamilton, Knox, Mid-Cumberland, Northeast, Northwest, Shelby, South Central, Southeast, Southwest and Upper Cumberland) have participated in the initiative, which was unofficially launched in mid-October but began in earnest on November 1.

"Building Families" has been the Department's extended recognition and celebration of November's National Adoption Awareness Month - a time when state governments, communities, businesses, organizations, families and individuals celebrate adoption as a viable, positive and proactive way to build families. DCS opted to maximize this opportunity by continuing the spirit, fervor and mission of the month through the end of the year. The Department has been able to achieve some noteworthy successes through its initiative by focusing largely on the need to find adoptive homes for children who are in full DCS guardianship in the foster care system. Moreover, as part of its guiding best practices, DCS pursues concurrent planning, a process through which the agency attempts to achieve reunification with biological families when possible, while it simultaneously strives for permanency and stability through adoption as an option.

"In striving to meet the needs of children and families in Tennessee, the Department sees the mission of 'Building Families - One Child at a Time' as an unyielding, year-long effort," said Commissioner Viola P. Miller. "We support the mission of National Adoption Awareness Month, and our employees put positive outcomes for all children at the forefront of our efforts every day."

DCS regional offices have held a range of events during "Building Families - One Child at a Time," including adoption fairs, adoption finalizations, special events for children in foster care and more. Several events were recently held throughout the state that reflect the Department's continuous commitment to help ensure positive outcomes for adoptable children in foster care.

In the Memphis area, the Shelby County regional DCS office coordinated eight adoption finalizations on Monday, Dec. 20, with Chancellor Walter Evans presiding. In what is planned as a three-day blitz, 41 adoptions will be finalized this week. The remaining 33 adoption finalizations will begin at 9 a.m., on Wednesday, Dec. 22, and Thursday, Dec. 23, at the Shelby County Chancery Court, located at 140 Adams Ave., in downtown Memphis. The Shelby County DCS office is also planning to hold a celebration for all families who completed adoptions during the "Building Families" initiative on January 22.

In Nashville, two final events of the "Building Families" initiative included one of the last adoption finalizations of 2004 and a forum on the adoption process. On Monday, Dec. 20, Judge Muriel Robinson, of the 4th Circuit Court in Nashville, finalized four adoptions of children who have been in DCS's full guardianship. Judge Robinson graciously added this date to her docket in a true showing of commitment to this cause, as the final scheduled date on her docket to complete adoptions this year was on December 7.

DCS also presented "Streamlining the Adoption Process," a meeting where nearly 60 key voices in adoption from across the state convened. Individuals invited included members of the DCS Core Leadership Team, DCS adoption staff, workers from the Center for Adoption and representatives of private provider agencies. The gathering focused on key departmental adoption issues, including post-adoption services, adoption assistance rates and more.

"This was an opportunity to gather some of the most seasoned adoption experts in this state to discuss best practices to streamline the process so children achieve permanency in a shorter timeframe," said Elizabeth Black, DCS executive director of child permanency. "We have made progress in this area this year, most notably with a new rule on expedited appeals and the expansion of adoption assistance, but we have more work to accomplish. This forum is the another step in the right direction."

In the Chattanooga area, 11 families also finalized adoptions on Monday. Four Hamilton County Circuit Court judges - Judge Jacqueline F. Schulten, Judge Samuel H. Payne, Judge L. Marie Williams and Judge W. Neil Thomas, III - added special dockets today to bring closure to families who hoped to complete adoptions before the holidays.

“This is one of the most fulfilling aspects of my job,” said Judge Thomas. “Adoption gives stability that would not otherwise be there for children who have been in the foster care system.”

The Tennessee Department of Children’s Services was established to provide the best possible care for children and youth who are in state custody, or at significant risk of entering custody, and their families. Services provided by DCS include child protective services, foster care, adoption, programs for delinquent youth, probation/aftercare, and treatment and rehabilitation programs for identified youth.

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